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### Recommended Citation

Ice, Randal and Nolan, Bob (1998). "Adult Education Programs of the New Deal: The Case of Oklahoma, 1933 - 1942," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1998/papers/34>

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# **Adult Education Programs of the New Deal: The Case of Oklahoma, 1933 - 1942**

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**Abstract.** The federal Adult Education programs of the Great Depression represented the response of the New Deal to unemployed teachers. Although these programs were essentially relief projects intended to take unemployed teachers off the rolls and hire them as adult educators, they resulted in: 1) establishing adult education as a legitimate field of practice with unique educational needs and methods; 2) introducing the nation to adult education theory as it then existed; and 3) teaching large numbers of adults to read for the first time.

## **Introduction**

Outside of the Americanization program and military training, the federal government's role in furthering adult education in the United States had not been widespread until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Clearly the largest and most comprehensive intervention of the federal government in the field of education was that of the adult education programs of the Depression Era. Before the Roosevelt Administration took such an activist role in shaping United States' society, Washington had been content to leave education up to the state and local communities. This resulted in widely varying practices and uneven quality of education that emphasized education of children and left adult education up to the individual and various self improvement societies and associations. The New Deal made a difference, according to Knowles (1962, p. 137), "...broadening the curriculum and freeing the adult schools' methodology from the shackles of traditional classroom procedures."

The focus of this historical study into the workings of the New Deal adult education initiatives in Oklahoma has been prompted by Houle's (1992) assertion that only one book-length study has been published to date about the adult education programs of the New Deal despite the magnitude of both the need occasioned by the Great Depression and services provided. Referring to Kornbluh's (1983) study of adult education programs of the era, the focus of which was primarily on the industrial settings of the eastern United States, Houle (Interviewed by Pauli and Beresh, n.d.) lamented the lack of serious studies on adult education of the Depression era, noting that "People act as if there is no knowledge base in the field of adult education..."

## **Prior Historical Research on the Period**

In his extensive review of the literature Houle (1992) observed that references to the adult education programs of the New Deal were scarce. Kornbluh (1983) studied workers' education of the Depression era, particularly in the industrial sector. Her analysis includes a detailed study of early efforts at women's education and gives an excellent

introduction to the federal agencies that arose out of the economic emergency of the time. Zeitlin (1958) studied the relationship between the federal government and the education establishment during the New Deal period. The closest study to the present one was a report of the first year of the adult education programs in Oklahoma by Jones (1935), which was extraordinarily valuable for setting the context of the period since Jones was a participant in the program. Unfortunately for us scholars, she only studied the first year of the program.

### Dissemination of Existing Adult Education Theory during the New Deal

Several books were influential during the adult education movement of the Depression era, including *Adult Education* by Bryson (1936) which was required reading for program administrators and teachers. This book was a response to the need for curriculum materials for the adult education teachers of the time. Another book frequently used was by Debatin (1938), which came out late in the decade and described the field of adult education and analyzed the financial basis for adult education as it then existed. These works communicated a pervasive concern about the lack of knowledge of adult education theory and methodology among practitioners. Adult education literature of the time broadly described the efforts to train adult educators which was an issue throughout the life of the New Deal. The following quote illustrates this concern:

Adult education is relatively new and its principles are not generally understood. Usually teachers coming on [sic] the program are lacking in proper educational training and experience because other agencies have not as yet provided adequate training in the field of adult education (Davis, 1940, p. 1).

Other works that influenced the framers of the New Deal adult education programs were Dewey's (1916) *Democracy and Education* which stressed the connection between education and democratic government and gave a general impetus to the adult education program as a method to combat possible Fascist and Communist reactions to the Depression. Peffer's (1926) *New Schools for Older Students* proposed in great detail the various types of adult education programs that could successfully be offered during that period. Lindeman's (1926) classic work as well as Dorothy Canfield Fisher's 1927 and 1930 books had great influence on the policy-makers of the New Deal programs. Thorndike (1935) was especially influential because he addressed the central question of adults' ability to learn. He called upon educators to ignore the myths and taboos and look at the facts. His studies showed:

...the ability to learn increased from early childhood to about age 25 and decreased gradually and slowly thereafter, about 1 percent per year. Childhood was found to be emphatically not the best age for learning in the sense of the age when the greatest returns per unit of time spent are received. The age for learning that is best in that sense is the twenties, and any age below 45 is better than ages 10 to 14 (Thorndike, 1935, p.2).

Other studies that influenced the framers of the New Deal policies on adult education came from England. Especially influential was Stanley's (1923) *The Way Out: Essays on the Meaning and Purpose of Adult Education*, which emphasized the value of adult education in addressing improvements in the social fabric. The most influential work coming from England, however, was the Ministry of Reconstruction's Final Report (1919) which described in detail what England had done during the World War I years. By comprehensively detailing how the British government dealt with a national emergency using adult education as a means, this work became a touchstone of conceptual thought for those who wanted to use similar means to overcome the economic emergency of the 1930s.

### Creation and Implementation of a Federal Adult Education Initiative

Upon taking office, Roosevelt found one quarter of the United States' workforce unemployed (Kornbluh, 1983). With little in the way of what today is called the social safety net, this situation produced a sense of desperation

among large segments of our society. In March of 1933 Roosevelt asked Congress to authorize an office of federal relief to aid the states. Within days Senate Bill 812 was introduced to "...provide for cooperation by the federal government with the states in relieving hardship and suffering caused by unemployment (Congressional Record, 1933, 77:1022)." After passage by the House in early April of that year, this bill became the basis for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Roosevelt quickly named Harry Hopkins to head this new agency. Hopkins used his experience working with Governor Roosevelt in New York to break with tradition on how to deal with poverty and unemployment. Not believing in direct financial relief, he sought to provide work for the unemployed in jobs created by public works, education and general community improvement. According to Hopkins, "...we as a nation had awakened to the fact that unemployment means more than physical want and physical idleness...the conservation and development of human resources is most important (Hopkins as quoted in Proffitt, 1938, p. 22)" With this basic set of assumptions, some of the first programs that Hopkins established under the FERA included the Emergency Education Program (EEP). This early initiative reflected Hopkins' belief in the value of education as a way of overcoming the problems of the period. The objectives of the EEP included: to increase understanding of social and political problems, to provide citizenship training for aliens, to reduce adult illiteracy, to provide vocational training and counseling and to provide continuing education opportunities to people who had left school early or whose schooling was cut short by the Depression (Works Progress Administration Technical Series, 1938).

The original design of the program provided economic relief and rehabilitation of unemployed teachers, but this was to be done while providing an education to those who would otherwise be left out of the system. Hopkins (as quoted in Proffitt, 1938, p. 23) was observed to have said, "We have tried to make a beginning in the development of a broad program of social education which would meet the interests and needs of adults and which would aim to fit the needs of our industrial democracy."

The initial thrust of the program began in August of 1933 when Hopkins authorized governors and FERA administrators to spend state relief funds to hire jobless teachers for reopening rural schools closed due to the drop in tax receipts. He also authorized the hiring of unemployed persons, teachers and non-teachers to provide literacy training for adults (Zeitlin, 1958). The education of illiterates was a top priority from the beginning. In 1932 only 18 states, Oklahoma not among them, contributed to the support of adult education (Zeitlin, 1958). This allowed the federal government to step in and bypass local education authorities. Opposition came from state educational officials who felt that the federal government had no place in local affairs. Others were distressed that education was being used as a tool for providing economic relief. They felt that hiring people off the relief rolls, even when hiring was limited to degreed, but non-certified teachers undermined educational quality. They also felt that a federal program to hire teachers would force the wages of all teachers upward. In reality, wages were set by the states and even varied from county to county (Norris, Personal communication, January 14, 1936). Moreover, the wages paid by WPA were usually much less than wages paid to regular teachers. FERA and WPA teachers rarely looked at the job as anything but temporary (Educational Work Relief for Jobless Teachers, 1933, p. 811).

### The Political Situation in Oklahoma Leads to Federalization of the Program

In 1933 William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray was governor of Oklahoma. Governor Murray had run against Roosevelt in several of the 1932 primaries. It was a bitter rivalry, colored by Murray's suggestion that Roosevelt's paralysis was the result of "locomotor ataxia," i.e., syphilis. Murray, although a Democrat, did not support the New Deal. Although the financial crisis in Oklahoma was desperate by 1933 when the beginning of decade had seen property taxes declining by \$30 million and farm income declining by 64% (Lambert, 1983), Murray's treatment of federal officials is unexplainable without reference to his personal animosity toward Roosevelt. According to Patterson (1969), when Aubrey Williams--FERA liaison officer to Oklahoma City--went to see the governor, Murray met him shoeless and offered him a cup of tea strained through his filthy handkerchief. During their conversation, Murray's comments about Roosevelt were riddled with profanity. Williams' impression of Oklahoma was no less negative; he reported to Washington thus, "...thieving and favoritism on all sides. I found that every Tom, Dick and Harry in the state was getting relief whether they were unemployed or not (Patterson, 1969, p. 54)."

Reports of this type led to the federalization of the adult education program in Oklahoma in February of 1934, a distinction Oklahoma shared only with Louisiana under Huey Long. Even after federalization, "Alfalfa Bill" Murray's political influence over the State Department of Education and the Vocational Education Department was a constant problem for Washington (Vaughan, Personal Communication, Oct. 23, 1933). Murray's influence was counteracted by the federal staff by imposing regulations that the program be under the control of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, John Vaughan. Vaughan's correspondence to Hopkins reveals that political hiring and firing of teachers was a problem during the entire period.

### Adult Education's Role in Preservation of Democracy

Hopkins and Adlerman repeatedly gave speeches stressing the importance of education in a democratic society. Education led to good citizenship. At the time public interest was directed to economic restructuring of the nation. A variety of political and social movements of the time advocated new societal structures from a change to communistic redistribution of wealth to a fascistic control by a strong government combined with ethnic cleansing. Radical movements and their leaders were a constant threat. Hopkins and Roosevelt looked at education as a way to combat such ideas. Hopkins stated, "Illiterates are dangerous to a democracy (as) they are easy prey to propaganda and exploitation (Hopkins, 1938, p. 39-40)." He felt that even when literate, the unemployed or under employed with a large amounts of free time on their hands would be more likely to pursue radical activities than those pursuing constructive leisure time activities such as attending adult education classes. Hopkins and Alderman were highly influenced by Lindeman who at that time was also employed by the WPA. Lindeman viewed fascism and communism as real threats to democracy. He believed that fascism was the greatest threat in America, noting that Mussolini had found more circumstances favorable to the development of fascism in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world (Stewart, 1991). In order to advance his views, Lindeman wrote numerous manuals and memoranda for the program. Lindeman stressed a democratic educational setting relying on discussion rather than authoritative lecture. He urged methods that relied on demonstrations, projects and experiments designed to get the students participating. (Lindeman, November, 1936).

Given the circumstances described above, the adult education program of the New Deal assumed almost a religious zealotness of preserving democracy. This allowed a departure from what had up to then been traditional education practices. Consequently individuals who had never been encouraged or even allowed opportunities were suddenly sought out as students. Minorities, women, immigrants and the down-trodden were suddenly looked upon as needing education. Failure to provide that education was seen as a risk to our democracy and our way of life.

### Implementation of the Program in Oklahoma

Eight hundred and ten teachers were initially hired and the adult education program operated in 73 out of 77 counties. Response to the program in Oklahoma was as enthusiastic as the rest of the nation. The *Chicago Daily News* (Adult Craving...March 10, 1934) reported, "...the adult demand for education is far in excess of what was anticipated even by persons foremost in the adult education movement." (p. 316).

Supervision was key to the success of the program in Oklahoma and supervisors made frequent visits to the various sites throughout the state. Supervisors credentials included prior education beyond the bachelor's degree with at least five years of educational experience, preferably in adult education. They were expected to maintain memberships in adult education societies and were even expected to maintain a personal library in adult education and related fields at their own expense (Davis, 1940). Supervisors were also expected to attend two to five week residential training sessions each year (Federal Works Agency of the WPA, 1941). All this was to be accomplished for the modest pay of \$175.00 per month (Giles, c., personal communication, Aug. 8, 1934).

In the Fall and Winter of 1934-35, a series of three six-week courses were offered to teachers at Oklahoma A&M College to prepare them to teach adults, something that few had ever done before (Jones, 1935). Training was done

by the State supervisor, recently returned from the national training course and by A&M College faculty. Topics during the six-week courses included: 1. Social foundations, 2) Philosophy and History of adult education, 3) Adult Education Methods, 4) Instructional materials development, 5) Planning conferences and workshops.

In the provision of adult education classes throughout the state, teachers were often responsible for obtaining a public place in which to hold the classes. Suggested places included churches, lodge halls or store buildings. No classes could be held in the homes of the teachers or the students. Students were to be 16 or older. Classes were free, however students had to be motivated to achieve some quantifiable objective. These objectives kept the programs accountable and helped public relations over the life of the program. Statistical results were often sent to newspapers in terms of amounts of food preserved, numbers of people taught to read. (Federal Works Agency of the WPA, 1941).

### Lessons to be Learned

The emphasis placed on accountability by the New Deal decision makers provides a needed lesson for today. The Records left behind amply testify to this fact: not only how many jars of food were canned in a home economics program, but the kinds of food (Stephens, 1937). Accountability, reflected in careful attention to detail countered the claims that the New Deal adult education programs were wasting money.

The New Deal adult education programs understood that adult education was different from common education. This initiative took college graduates and laid off teachers of elementary and secondary education and introduced them to adult education concepts and principles. Washington spokespersons, influenced by Lindeman and others of the period, knew that adults could not be taught successfully using the same methods employed in the public schools. Hence, special staff development programs were put in place and adult education theory as it then existed was disseminated for the first time to many people who were ignorant of such theory.

Adult education was used to help preserve democracy in a period when the entire world seemed to be moving in the direction of totalitarianism as an answer to economic turmoil. In the view of the leaders of the New Deal, adult education, perhaps more than any other program, was a key factor keeping the populace from seeking totalitarianism as a solution to the country's ills.

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